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Acropolis Cinema and MUBI present
The Los Angeles premiere of

El Mar La Mar

By Joshua Bonnetta and J.P. Sniadecki

February 27 — 8pm
Downtown Independent

EL MAR LA MAR

94 min // USA // 2017

Shot over several years in the Sonoran Desert near the US/Mexico border, Joshua Bonnetta and J.P. Sniadecki's intensely complex and transcendent *El mar la mar* weaves together oral histories of desert border stories with hand-processed, grainy 16mm images of the flora, fauna and those who trespass the mysterious terrain, riddled with items its travelers have left behind. A sonically rich soundtrack adds another, sometimes eerie, dimension; the call of birds and other nocturnal noises invisibly populate the austere landscape.



Berlinale 2017. Elemental Poetics

By Yaron Dahan

The following article was originally published in MUBI's Notebook

There is something anachronic about the desert, something eternal, elemental. The desert exists beyond time, beyond idea; it exists as an experience, as a belief, as a test; as a place of exile, of purification, of spirit. Joshua Bonnetta and J.P. Sniadecki's documentary, *El Mar La Mar* begins in the desert void—in the darkness of a desert night: wind, crickets, footsteps, a howling in the distance. Sounds reach out from the nocturnal desert, creating an amorphous impression of place, a place which thousands of hopeful migrants must traverse in order to reach the promised Zion of the American Dream.

This Sonoran desert is the place of the crossing and its obstacle for the thousands moving flowing towards the U.S., a space broken down in *El Mar La Mar* into its constitutive elements: Sky. Sand. Mountains. Trees. Fire. Bats. Horses. Men.

The cacti, the rocks, the natural elements are recomposed with the human ones, vestigial articles of voyages encountered, each one containing the potential of story—shoes, bags, water bottles, backpacks, cellphones, ID cards, jeans—objects sun-bleached, sand-covered, testaments to prior passages. A water bottle challenging the viewer

with a provocative and rhetorical question: “Esta Dios en Ustedes?” Does god reside inside you?

In *El Mar La Mar* images of the grand migration across the Mexican border emerge from the surface of the Sonoran landscape. Rather than dramatizing the crossing itself, the film takes an observational, sensorial perspective to record the visual and aural elements that indicate the voyages perils and tragedies, its travails and successes, allowing a subtle narration to emerge from the landscape itself.

This voyage through the borderlands (our voyage, the migrant's voyage, the voyage of the hikers and border guards and filmmakers) takes place in the void that is the desert, an emptiness which leaves aside the immediate and ephemeral to draw out the natural and the spiritual, often linked with one another.

A Mexican woman slips her body into a water source, a tiny trickling remnant of the Rio Grande dammed thousands of miles away in *El Norte*, her soft brown body sliding into the refreshing water in a baptismal gesture that has little to do with Christianity but is rather a ritual brought back to its elemental

origins: a human body purifying and healing itself in the aqueous element, an act contextualized in the desert's aridity whose significance is both practical (washing) and mystical (cleansing).

Unidentifiable forms stalk the horizon in silhouette. Tracks are left in the sand. Voices of unknown animals call in the night. The fluttering of hundreds of batwings obscures the sky. Images like these and others are projected asynchronously from the sound, the elements visual and auditory delivered separately and simultaneously like stanzas of a poem, each element lacking a precise clarity of meaning, yet when composed together, which build to transform into the experience of a desert crossing.

This discrepancy between sound and image in *El Mar La Mar* creates a tension, defining the film's poetical style, which restores meaning through thoughtful artifice, re-sensitizing the eye and ear to quotidian events that we believe we understand but do not. No political opinion is proffered. No dramatized situation is exploited. This poetical bent allows meaning to build, to aggregate, to coagulate. Significance emerges from the desert landscape and *El Mar La Mar* becomes a testimony of the experience of crossing. Of the land crossed. Of encounters. Of discoveries. Of objects left behind. Of bodies left behind.

Not that the film is apolitical. On the contrary. Above these elemental images of sky, of night, of horizon, arise unidentifiable desert sounds which evoke its danger and mystery. Disembodied voices of unseen storytellers, residents and voyagers in this Sonoran desert weave together to recount a narrative of place: A hiker who comes across a desiccated corpse, and finds nearby a gorgeous bright blue Mexican blanket which she uses to cover the body; a resident who encounters a shivering migrant waiting hesitantly outside her house in the hard cold of the early desert morning, welcoming him into her threshold to warm his body by the fire; a cowboy who discovers a bleached human skull and gathers wildflowers to place upon the skull in an act of mourning and respect.

These are more than happenstance stories, but ones which define an ethos of empathy, each one illustrating a benevolent individual action—disinterested gestures which are compassionate, humanist, communal. A community created by the sharing of a common space, by the ever-present menace of thirst and death.

These stories of resident Americans in English are imbricated with the stories of the migrants in Spanish, of lives saved, of friends left behind, of luck or unluck in crossing. The mixing of these voices in two languages effaces the border, revealing a common territory, one linked in material space, just the landscape's physical elements testify to nothing if not the border's insignificance in face of nature.

El Mar La Mar manifests a profound respect for nature, a perspective which accompanies its profound humanity. The choice to record the place on 16mm film is itself a political act, a recognition of the fundamental characteristic of the material, which must in some way be subject to nature, and rejection of the digital, which unattached from nature always subjugates it. Through its recording upon celluloid the Sonoran desert where this grand Migration takes place is transformed from an idea (one easily manipulated in common political discourse) into an actual place with immutable dangers and material characteristics, with snakes and dust and bats and sunsets. This attachment to the natural exposes how the events which occur within this landscape are defined by it (the impossibility to police a desert, the vast emptiness in which the self gets lost, the colossal temperature differences between day and nighttime which poses a constant danger...).

It is through this consideration of the human as a part of a greater web of Nature which is the foundation of *El Mar La Mar's* basic humanism. A natural perspective taken upon human action can only fundamentally erode nationalist politics—to privilege the natural is to ignore the state, is to expose the follies of the ephemeral, of possession, of capital, of victory—foolish vanities which dissipate into worthlessness in face of nature's extended temporality, in the time of the desert, counted not in days but in centuries.

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